

Turned on, Tuned In, but not Dropped Out: Enhancing the student experience with popular social media platforms

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Introduction:

The days of the static school noticeboard are over. There is no longer a need or desire for small groups of students to hover around a central location, discussing past happenings and future advertised events printed onto dog-eared paper flyers, posted onto a framed set of wall-mounted cork floor tiles in the lobby of the admin office. However, the need and desire to stay plugged into the student social community has not disappeared, but has been transformed by modern developments in the way students interact with each other.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and non-proprietary online blogs, are an inherent part of the modern student's life, and the apps which provide the link between these parent sites and the student's mobile phones, tablets and laptops create an unprecedented immediacy in the way that messages are communicated between users.

Until now, social media has been primarily used as a separate entity, albeit importantly, to the 'at university'/offline student experience – perhaps as a means of promoting special events, such as social activities or extra-curricular lectures, or to raise general awareness for a type of regular practice – such as creating specialist groups for online discussions of certain aspects of university life, but we see this as a missed opportunity.

The problem is that university branded and run online social media groups have tended to be seen by students as a sort of 'sub-class' of online social interaction, with many students either opting-out of receiving regular notifications from these groups – thereby negating the benefits of compiling a seemingly large membership – or allowing regular notifications, but having their effect minimised as students become inured to the constant stream of information which education providers deem potentially useful, but which the student acknowledges is not personally targeted and therefore easy and beneficial to mentally filter-out completely.

However, with some modification to the way that educational online communities are created and administered, it has been proved that the 'grey area' between total immersion and total denial of university-led social media can be achieved, to enhance learning, improve social interaction between students in all programmes and years of study, and create healthy, largely unregulated communities aimed at improving the student experience.

Online social communities:

The University of Hertfordshire' School of Law Facebook group, created and run by the university (link: <https://www.facebook.com/UH.Law?fref=ts>) currently has 2172 'likes', which indicates that 2172 unidentified users have visited the page and wish to be updated as to new posts. The posts on this page range from promoting special programmes, guest

lectures and social events to current students, to advertising courses and places to prospective students.

One of the programmes advertised on December 14th 2014 was for a special edition of the School's 'War of Words' (WoW) credit-bearing co-curricular course events based on the university-wide common reading initiative. This latter initiative has faced fierce competition from the School's wide range of credit-bearing short courses and, despite being promoted through the the University's managed learning environment - and social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter etc, has received limited take-up by students. Indeed, when the event was posted onto the page it received 4 member 'likes' – two of which were from companies outside of, and certainly not endorsed by, the university, seeking to attract attention for their private law tutoring essay writing services.

However, when this same event was promoted through the War of Words co-curricular course blog (link: <https://uhwarofwords.wordpress.com>) and UH Mooting (another of the School's credit-bearing co-curricular short courses) Facebook page (link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/153137741559742/?fref=ts>) with a combined membership of less than 600 students, the event attracted over 100 students.

This significant difference in student engagement numbers is considered here as being due to the creation of online groups which are targeted at a specifically defined subject matter, rather than generic, one-size-fits-all, groups that do not contain:

- (a) A common thread between members;
- (b) A specific aim for the group, apart from acting as a conduit, by the group's creator, for marketing/promotions of general activities;
- (c) Any means or desire, by the group's creator, to regulate posted content, beyond that of ensuring that university UPRs and Codes of Conduct are adhered to.

However, the size of the groups does not seem to be relevant ('UH Mooting' has 545 Facebook members, comprising current and past students, but strictly no members from outside the School of Law). As long as the three principles above are adhered to, group engagement is optimised.

UH Mooting and UH War of Words (WoW):

Mooting and War of Words (WoW) are School based co-curricular advocacy courses, accredited by the university as part of a student's professional development diploma, but not

part of the School's traditional degree courses themselves. Participation is voluntary, but highly recommended so as to improve practical skills and enhance student employability prospects.

Delivery of these courses is through compulsory membership of the 'UH Mooting' Facebook group and 'UHWoW' Wordpress blog – students must create online profiles or submit personal email addresses, depending on the online platform's requirements for participation – however, whether notifications from these platforms reach the member, or are turned off, is up to the members themselves. Students who show initial reluctance to joining these platforms (for various reasons) are encouraged to create 'empty' profiles – without photographs, and under assumed names if preferred – which redresses the problem. So far, no student has been precluded from joining for any reason.

The reason that these platforms were chosen – rather than through the university's proprietary intranet system ('managed learning environment') – was on the basis of:

- (i) Immediacy of communication – users of the University's managed learning environment are not automatically updated with news and information;
- (ii) Profile gathering – users do not have a 'profile' or 'conversation thread' capabilities in the same way as social media platforms, which means that members cannot communicate with each other easily/create new links through 'friend requests' etc;
- (iii) Continuity – users of the University's managed learning environment are removed from the system after their time at university is complete, which means that alumni are precluded from using the resource to show prospective employers practical examples of involvement/allow new users to communicate with alumni for advice etc;
- (iv) Freedom of expression – users tend not to communicate freely for fear of an unknown faction of other users who have access to their posts;
- (v) Easy links to other resources – users of the University's managed learning environment do not have access to a single repository of documents, schedules and information in quite as easy a way as with Facebook/blogs etc;
- (vi) Easy links to other media – users do not have the same onscreen access to posted photographs/video thumbnails/open graph meta tags etc;

- (vii) Customisation – the University's managed learning environment is not easily customised, except for using header photographs and logos. On blogsites, each group is customisable to reflect the different identities/aims/'flavour' of the groups;
- (viii) Regulation – the University's managed learning environment is complex and sophisticated administration system is not as autonomous and immediate as it is for a group creator. All content must be approved through one or few authorised people, which means that the groups' aims, identities and peaceful interaction among members are never under threat.

The 'UH Mooting' Facebook group has been running for two academic years, at the time of writing, with 545 current members. Alumni are still asking to join the group, despite having left university. The group is used as an online resource for course materials and as a means of communicating between organisers and members, and among the members themselves. All posts must be approved by the group's admin, and are restricted to mooting topics (although this is loosely applied, to encourage a social element to evolve).

The 'UH WoW' Wordpress blog is new this academic year and has over 60 current members. The blog is used to advertise future events, invite participation and post photographs of past events. Not only is WoW used for the co-curricular course, but it also used for special events, such as the aforementioned common reading programme, and for the School's special event 'Xmas Staff WoW' - which saw eight senior members of the School's academic staff take on the student audience in topics as diverse as 'That university fees are too cheap' and 'That all is fair in love and war'. The UH Mooting group links to the UH WoW blog to create a wider promotional base – this does not contravene principle (a) and (b) above, as the two courses are of similar subject matter and have a mainly shared membership base.

For all WoW events, the participants change weekly – which means that the event promotion is hitting a wide audience rather than to a small sector of die-hard supporters who would likely participate regardless of the level of promotion – and are always well attended. The Xmas Staff WoW event saw the largest student participation of any 'non-party' event, with over 100 spectators.

There is, however, an exception to (b), where student engagement may still be maintained if a group is set up purely for pastoral aims and the group is used for promoting activities and events of 'general benefit' (as long as there is not a relentless deluge of info posted). This is shown in the following case study based on the School's 'Team system':

School of Law 'Team system':

This academic year (2014-15), saw the creation of a brand new online community, set up for the purpose of integrating new students with existing students in an online network of Facebook groups. 1200 students across all years and programmes of study were randomly placed into sixty four groups, of approximately 18 students each, with groups administered by a designated student lead mentor (SLM) who acts a group adviser, content regulator and liaison between group and School.

The aim of the system is to create an online social community which provides a degree of pastoral care. There are no specified 'learning outcomes' or aims, other than that of enhancing social cohesion among the student cohort. This aim was publicised to the students at the start of the academic year, and they were made aware that the system was set up for this general benefit. Throughout the year, SLMs post interesting discussion topics, general advice and links to beneficial resources, relating to general law-specific academic pursuits.

On the occasions when specific events or activities have been promoted by the School to the SLMs and then onto the student cohort, the effect has been dramatic – student engagement has been unprecedentedly high. The three examples are:

1. Hallowe'en party – student attendance at over 200. A two-fold attendance increase over that of any other previous student recreational event;
2. Law careers fair – student sign-ups immediately increased three-fold after the event was publicised by SLMs, despite promotional materials being available on the University's managed learning environment and the School's general Facebook page/Twitter account for a number of weeks prior;
3. Student barometer – the School achieved a completion rate of 37% after promotion by SLMs, which is, by far, the highest return across all of the schools in the university, with the normal promotional materials available to all schools for many weeks prior. This is the clearest indication of the success of the Team system.

With all of these examples, the students' involvement was voluntary, the activities not geared towards the academic programmes, and the events were recommended by the School to encourage participation as a 'general, non-specified benefit'.

The system is also used to promote WoW, which is likely to be the reason why the weekly WoW attendance is high and varies weekly, and staff Xmas WoW saw unprecedented participation levels.

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Conference Presentation:

The authors intend to explore the issues outlined above and to seek to address the issue of whether the student experience may be enhanced through the directed use of popular social media platforms. The proposed presentation, and paper, for BILETA will draw on both empirical data charting student engagement across a range of activities and social media platforms, and will also make use of student feedback via a number of video clips from interviews undertaken during the academic year.

Recommendations will be proposed in terms of:

- (a) the role which popular social media platforms may play in the student experience;
- (b) whether University managed learning platforms in general (drawing on the experience at this University) should seek to evolve beyond a functional educational tool to encompass aspects of community engagement for students; and
- (c) the inherent parameters encountered with such social media based activities.

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